

Introduction

David Osher

THINK OF YOUR FIRST DAYS at school, or at a new school. Maybe you arrived with high hopes, expectations, and excitement. Or perhaps, due to previous negative experiences, you felt wary. One way or the other, you felt alone—until you experienced something that gave you a sense of comfort and belonging. Maybe it was a principal or teacher meeting you at the front door, smiling, calling you by your name, and expressing happiness that you were there. If you were lucky, you soon felt safe and supported, were engulfed in learning, and felt that you belonged and that you could succeed. If you were particularly fortunate, these feelings characterized your entire school career: you experienced challenging and engaging educational opportunities and support for realizing them, and you could develop the skills, mindsets, and identity that helped you build a future.

This happens in some places, at some times, in some classes, for some students. But all too frequently, it does not happen for other students, who experience poor conditions for learning, have limited opportunities for deep learning and creativity, and realize poor or mediocre learning outcomes. Multiple sources of data outline the dimensions of this problem. These data document persistent disparities for students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities, students whose families and communities struggle with poverty, and students who experience trauma and other adversities.¹

So how can schools routinely create a caring community that supports the social-emotional and academic needs of all students? How can schools realize equitable high standards and build and foster deeper learning and

creativity while supporting the physical, emotional, and identity safety and engagement of every student? These are the questions that many educators try daily to answer. As we discuss in the next section, we now have a unique opportunity to address them successfully thanks to advances in science, lessons from practice, and recent legislative policy. We have compiled this volume to leverage this information and to provide a comprehensive resource of research-based practices, frameworks, and tools for school leaders and other professionals who support children and youth in and out of school. With contributions from experts in a variety of fields who serve as chapter coauthors, we have designed the book to help you, the professional educator, address these questions in a practical, strategic way. Our aim is to help you improve your school and district and accelerate equitable and quality outcomes—both in the short and long run—no matter how close or far you currently are from equity with excellence at scale.

This volume builds on a variety of reports and publications produced by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), notably the 2004 publication *Safe, Supportive, and Successful Schools Step by Step*.² It is also based on the editors' and coauthors' extensive experience, including our ongoing work with urban, suburban, rural, and frontier schools and with districts, states, and agencies in every US state and territory. Our experience includes both consultation and technical assistance with schools, districts, agencies, and states as well as evaluation research and synthesis activities to identify and apply what we know about supporting student, educator, school, and system capacity so that every student is engaged and thrives—both educationally and as a whole person. We have discovered a great need for a single resource that helps educators think strategically about what it takes to create schools that support deep learning and well-being for all students, that makes sense of all the existing programs and frameworks, and that provides a road map as well as recommended tools. This book intends to do exactly that.

WHY THE OPPORTUNITY IS NOW

Scientific Advances: Science-Based Principles for Learning and Development

Over the past decade, researchers working in neurobiology, learning science, developmental science, psychology, child and youth development, and education have learned much about the factors that enhance or impede learning and development for children and adolescents. This knowledge converges on

practical science-based principles regarding learning and development that have been reviewed by leading scientists and practitioners.³ These principles include the following:

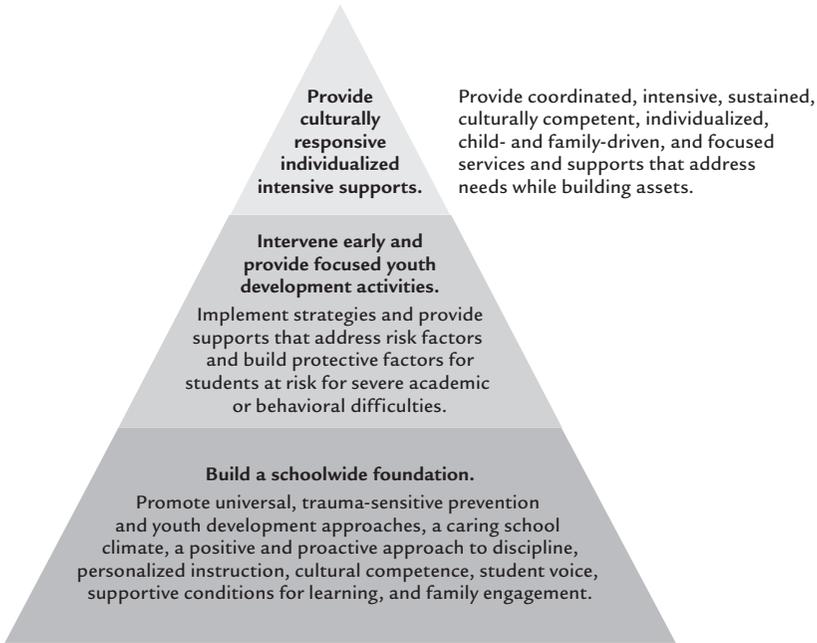
- Relationships and stress drive and undermine learning.
- Social-emotional and academic skills interrelate and can be learned.
- Conditions for learning and teaching matter.
- The impacts of stress and adversity must and can be addressed, and resilience can be supported.
- Culture, identity, and subjective perceptions affect learning.
- Neurobiological and neurohormonal processes (e.g., the impact of cortisol) can support or undermine learning.
- Learning and development is both social and individual.
- Multiple factors within the individual and the individual's context contribute to results.
- New analytical techniques enable us to personalize instruction by addressing the multiple factors that contribute to results.

Lessons from Practice: Successes and Failures

At the same time as scientific understanding has evolved, practice-based research and wisdom have accumulated. We have learned the following from the successes and failures of interventions and other initiatives intended to support children and youth:

- Evidence is necessary but not sufficient; readiness to implement, implementation quality, and context matter.
- Cultural competence and responsiveness are essential to realizing both equity and excellence.
- Academic pressure without student engagement and support does not work.
- Comprehensive approaches that align social-emotional, academic, and health supports can best address barriers to learning.
- Comprehensive approaches can be efficiently implemented through a relational, multitiered model (see figure I.1) with a robust foundation adapted to local needs.
- Data-informed planning and continuous improvement are necessary to drive change; these data should include stakeholder perceptions and concerns.

Figure I.1 Work at three levels



- Collaborative, strengths-based asset mapping enhances collaboration and efficiency.

Legislative Policy: Implications of the Every Student Succeeds Act

This book comes at a fortuitous time, not only thanks to advances in knowledge from science and practice, but also because today’s educators are being encouraged by policy makers, families, and communities to monitor the quality of their school climate and its effect on all students. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015, provides opportunities for school personnel to improve student academic progress by addressing the whole child and equity. The legislation’s Title IV, Part A, grant program guidance states that education agencies may adopt strategies to support children’s social-emotional development to meet the program’s mandate to deliver a “well-rounded education.” As part of its accountability system, ESSA requires a nonacademic “fifth indicator,” which can relate to whole-child development, student engagement, or school climate. The act prioritizes

equitable schools and opportunities for students to engage deeply in their academic experience. ESSA also emphasizes the use of data to continually inform state and local improvements.

VOICES THAT INFORM OUR PERSPECTIVE

In addition to the sources of knowledge and policy just described, throughout this book we draw upon what we have learned from students, teachers, pupil services personnel, administrators, family members, and agency staff. We begin now with the voices of youth and teachers.

Youth

In countless conversations in schools and in forums, youth have told us what they need from adults in order to thrive. These conversations have enriched our thinking and undergird much of the advice in this book. Here is some of what they say:

You see me as you want to. If all you see is a stereotype, then you shall never know me, but you will forever know who I am not. (*Langston, an African American high school senior from New England*)

You don't know me; you just see me. You don't even give me a chance. (*Melissa, a seventeen-year-old Caucasian high school student*)

I am the one people expect less of, the underachiever, the dropout. No, I think not. But I am the one who had to go against all stereotypes, mean and dirty looks, and much worse. (*José, a Mexican American youth advocate who dropped out of a California high school*)

Know students' names, and call them by their names; know what embarrasses them, and never embarrass them. (*Mexican American student activists from Texas, when asked what teachers can do to make classes work*)

We are not afraid of challenge and hard work, because our teachers "have our backs." (*African American high school students responding to the question, "Are you ever pushed too hard?"*)

We are happy when we have a sense of belonging. (*Caucasian 4-H youth when asked, "What makes you happy?"*)

Teachers

Teachers, who work most directly with children and youth, have also informed this volume. Here is one teacher's story from Mary Cathryn D. Ricker,

a National Board–certified teacher and executive vice president of the American Federation of Teachers. Mary’s story, like many stories we have heard, illustrates the need for a comprehensive, systematic approach to supporting students:

When I was a new teacher hired to teach eighth-grade English, the middle school I joined had just completed a lengthy process of redefining itself as a middle school and adopting middle school philosophies and practices, including printing posters to be displayed in every classroom that began with “All students can learn.”

It was an important, informal induction into my profession, which solidified three lessons from my teacher training program: approach everything with the belief that all students can learn; don’t assume anyone knows you believe that if you haven’t explicitly stated it; and if students aren’t learning in your class, then do the work to uncover what barriers are preventing them from learning and remove them.

Initially, I believed the barriers were in the four walls of the classroom. I asked myself questions such as, “Did I need to reteach something? Were the definitions clear enough? Had I given enough time to the material? Did I provide interesting and relevant connections to create engaging lessons?” Looking back on my career in the classroom, I realized that these were surmountable obstacles to learning I could control—not that they weren’t pernicious from time to time.

While those barriers existed and it was my primary job to look for and remove them, I noticed issues that didn’t reflect on my inability to introduce a short story in an engaging way or had nothing to do with offering constructive feedback on a student’s writing that was both clear and concise—for example, the student who was frequently late to class, the student who refused to sit in his new seat assignment, the student who put his head down on the desk and started sleeping shortly after class started, or the student who would come back from lunch crying and ask to go to the bathroom.

Initially, these situations elicited a superficial disciplinary response. Being marked tardy meant lunch detention. Refusing to sit down in a newly assigned seat like every other student meant a stand-off that resulted in sending a student out of the classroom, while I felt my authority was challenged. The student who slept got nudged

awake as often as needed so the principal wouldn't walk in and see a student sleeping in class and reprimand me (and how was I supposed to know if my lessons were engaging if a student wouldn't even try to engage with them?!). Maybe the student crying would have to use a pass to go to the bathroom.

However, none of these situations were what they seemed on the surface. After some investigation, I learned that the student who was frequently late to class had purposefully hung back in the classroom to avoid students who otherwise would bully her when they found her in the hallway. The student who refused to sit down told the social worker that the desk he was assigned would be too embarrassing to sit in because it had an attached chair and he was afraid he wouldn't fit in it; he was too embarrassed to tell me that. The student who slept in class had a part-time job at a local fast food restaurant and took only closing shifts so he could be home after school to watch his little sister. And all those students who returned to the classroom after lunch crying? (There were many more than one. A lot happens at lunch in middle school.) They all had their reasons, and when you are twelve or thirteen or fourteen and life happens, sometimes it's sad or it hurts. No teacher telling you, "It's time to learn now" is going to distract you from how sad you are or how hurt you feel.

In these cases, and countless others, students were lacking a safe environment, or maybe they didn't feel supported by the teacher or their school community. I realized there was something besides my teaching that wasn't engaging them or that there was a logic in their world outside of school that was more relevant, meaningful, or engaging to them and took precedence. In some cases, school was not a place where they felt successful because their success, sometimes just in that moment, was tied to something the school did not have a way to value.

The realization that a school community, and a teacher in that school community, had the responsibility to show students their lives had value extended into the other things I noticed or discovered were impediments to learning. For example, I had a student who was frequently absent after he turned thirteen. When his mom came to parent/teacher conferences, she apologized profusely for his attendance, with him sitting right there, and went on to explain that she and her children were homeless and had moved from her car to a shelter to be just

a little more comfortable; but now that her son was thirteen, he didn't get to stay in the "women's and children's" side anymore. He had to stay in the men's side. He wasn't getting much sleep, so he would sleep when he was with her. There was a student whose work started to drop off after a strong start to the school year. When I called home, I found out the student's older sister had recently been convicted of a crime and sent to jail. Her mom said they had all been struggling with the situation at home. One Monday, a student came to school and walked into homeroom with his wrist cupped in his opposite hand. He came up to me, showed me his wrist—which was blue, purple, black, and about three sizes larger than it should have been—and asked, "Ms. Ricker, my mom wanted me to ask you if I could see the nurse this morning to take a look at my thumb?" His family had no health insurance. His mother had kept him as comfortable as she could all weekend with ice, over-the-counter pain relievers, and her constant attention. The school nurse was his urgent care center.

How do we create school environments that support the learning and development of the whole child with these and other barriers to learning and development? What conditions need to be in place so that I can successfully meet the academic needs of students while being present and mindful of the social and emotional needs of students as well? How can we assure those professionals that they are not expected to do this alone and that there is an entire school community collaborating toward successfully meeting the needs of our students? That our talents in isolation may be impressive, but our talents in concert with those of our colleagues are unstoppable? How do we amplify the professional voices of those of us hired because of our expertise at meeting the needs of students? What are the most meaningful ways of collaborating with our students, their families, and our surrounding community to create safe and supportive spaces that engage learners and their families for the most successful outcomes possible?

We start this book featuring the voices of students and teachers because they are essential to driving equity with excellence and must be at the center of school improvement. We could also begin with pupil services personnel, who work hard to provide students with individual support, but often feel

marginalized or overloaded by staff-to-student ratios, or by needing to spend time on documentation rather than on consultation and student support. Or we could begin with the visionary principals and superintendents we have met, who are committed to supporting both teachers and students and who envision schools that promote the success of all students, foster creativity and healthy development, and contribute to the wellness of their entire community. We could also start with family members, who, like teachers, balance multiple jobs and roles. They support their children 24/7, and experience their children's strengths and needs as a whole—not as a set of service silos. Or, we could start with culturally competent agency staff who employ strengths-based, family- and child-driven approaches to supporting children and youth. We have written about all of these groups elsewhere, and include their perspectives throughout this book.⁴

For these reasons, this book purposely employs the word *you* for our intended readers—superintendents, principals, teachers, out-of-school educators, paraprofessionals, pupil service professionals, student leaders, family members, board members, and agency staff. This book is designed to help *you*, and other members of your school or district community, realize your goals and aspirations by leveraging the assets and addressing the challenges of fostering educational equity with excellence in a way that includes social and emotional learning (SEL) and deeper learning for all students. We know this work is hard and has many elements. However, it is made harder by ineffective, underaligned, incoherent solutions that address only part of the problem and may add to the burden on students, families, teachers, and leaders. This book will help you by:

- naming and explaining problems and their interconnectedness;
- strengthening your school's capacity to assess needs, identify solutions, plan implementation, and roll out your plan in a way that maximizes engagement and support;
- showing how you can identify, adapt, and align interventions that will work in your context;
- providing tools to assess and develop readiness to implement these interventions and to monitor, assess, and continually improve what you do;
- supplying links to other tools and resources; and
- documenting examples of schools, districts, and communities that have experienced success with a comprehensive, systematic approach.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The chapters in this volume are organized in four parts focusing on activities that will enable you to create schools that support the social-emotional and academic needs of all students and produce excellence with equity. Although each chapter can be read as a stand-alone resource, the parts are organized in a logical, iterative order and the chapters are interdependent, with specific chapters describing certain issues and practices in depth. Links to all of the major tools and other resources mentioned in the chapters can be found in appendix B. For direct access to the tools and resources referenced throughout this volume, you can go to www.air.org/SafeEquitableEngaging.

Part I: Build Capacity

Chapters 1 through 5 address building the capacity of the school and its staff to lead and implement the work with passion, enthusiasm, and efficiency. This involves building skills, structures, and motivation, including organizational incentives, to do the work; fostering leadership qualities and teams that work well; and conducting needs assessments and developing strategies and action plans that include the right interventions. Topics by chapter are as follows:

- Developing individual and organizational readiness and capacity (chapter 1)
- Leading schools and school improvement through effective leadership and key teams (chapter 2)
- Implementing needs assessment and asset mapping, identifying doable and sustainable interventions that produce short-term gains while addressing the root causes of problems and challenges, developing an action plan and indicators for monitoring, and securing stakeholder input and investment (chapter 3)
- Becoming a critical consumer ready to select the right programs, practices, strategies, approaches, curricula, and policies for your specific context and concerns, and understanding the challenges of implementation and adaptation (chapter 4)
- Identifying, leveraging, and coordinating resources that can support whole-child education and development, including blending and braiding funding and redeploying resources (chapter 5)

Part II: Engage

Chapters 6 through 10 focus on engaging and harnessing the strengths of the school's undertapped stakeholders. You will learn the following:

- How and why to implement culturally competent and responsive approaches (chapter 6)
- Strategies for engaging students and employing youth development approaches (chapter 7)
- Ways to effectively engage families in a culturally responsive and family-driven way to maximize partnership, equity, and excellence (chapter 8)
- Methods to effectively engage and collaborate with the community (chapter 9)
- Techniques for leveraging community-based, expanded learning and support (chapter 10)

Part III: Act

Chapters 11 through 19 address approaches to creating safe, supportive, engaging, academically robust, and equitable schools. They cover these activities:

- Building a foundation for equity with excellence through the lens of a generalized three-tiered model to support the success of all students (chapter 11)
- Building and restoring school communities through relational and restorative practices (chapter 12)
- Creating respectful, trauma-sensitive, and inclusive schools with intentional programing to address and prevent the effects of adversity and marginalization (chapter 13)
- Using multitiered systems of support (MTSS) to coordinate and align academic and behavioral goals (chapter 14)
- Employing selective intervention strategies to address the needs of students who are at some elevated risk of academic, social-emotional, and/or behavioral problems (chapter 15)
- Employing intensive, indicated interventions to address the needs of students who are at a highly elevated risk of academic, social-emotional, and/or behavioral problems (chapter 16)
- Employing effective approaches to leverage the power of universal SEL skill-building programs (chapter 17)

- Building conditions for teaching so that teachers feel supported and equipped to address the needs of all of their students (chapter 18)
- Addressing learning challenges in a way that accounts for the individualized and culturally grounded nature of learning, does not stigmatize students or create negative identities, and scaffolds skill development and engagement in deeper learning (chapter 19)

Part IV: Improve

The concluding chapter underscores the importance of continuous improvement—specifically, progress monitoring and formative and summative assessment techniques—for creating and maintaining safe, equitable, and engaging school cultures (chapter 20).

Building equity with excellence is important for our children, our communities, and ourselves. It is not an easy task. But it can be and is being done. This book is intended to help you do this work in a sustainable manner—collaboratively, respectfully, and strategically.